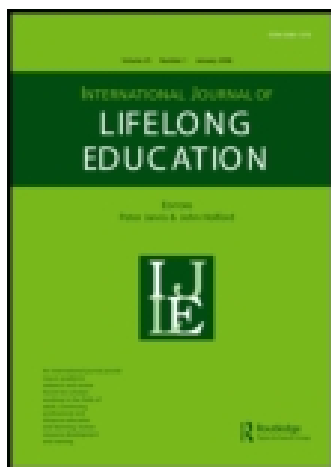


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Learning about ourselves from others: transformation of artists' identities through community-based arts practice

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Community-based arts projects can act as powerful learning opportunities in a variety of lifelong and life wide contexts. Many of these projects involve artists, who usually undertake a leading role to ensure that some type of transformation takes place for those involved. The impact on the leaders—in this case the artists—is difficult to identify, even if they have been involved in several community-based arts projects. In this paper I provide insights drawn from my doctoral thesis. There I explored the cumulative impact on artists who work on community-based arts projects, what transformations and learning occurred for them as a result of working on these projects, and how those experiences contributed to their identities. My study involved hermeneutic phenomenological/narrative research approaches based on in-depth semi-structured interviews with 12 visual artists. Data were analysed using a recursive and spiralling process and were subsequently presented thematically as a neonarrative. The findings discussed in this article relate to the artists' attempts at reconciling aspects of their individual, social and cultural identities by challenging their own as well as the community's perceptions of artists. The cumulative effect of being involved in community-based arts practice also provided the artists with ongoing identity capital in that they came to realize that they learnt about themselves by connecting with others. The findings contribute to the emerging debate that challenges the narrow view of measuring the value of community-based art projects based on instrumental and public worth, and invites exploration of the private and intrinsic impact on individuals.

The arts and artists in the context of lifelong learning/education

There is a growing body of evidence that community-based arts projects provide a range of benefits. These benefits include improvements in educational standards (Fiske 2000, Hunter 2005, Bamford 2006, Donelan *et al.* 2009); personal health, social capital, urban renewal or neighbourhood regeneration, tolerance, and cross cultural understanding (McQueen-Thomson and Ziguras 2002, Myer 2002, Rogers and Spooks 2003, Mulligan *et al.* 2007); and creativity and economic development (Robinson 1999, Arts Victoria 2004). Community-based

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arts projects that bring about these improvements occur in a range of lifelong educational and other lifelong learning settings.

The terms lifelong education and lifelong learning are often used interchangeably, which can be problematic. According to Billet (2010) both terms have quite different meanings. Watson (2003) argues that lifelong education is geared toward structures that involve formal approaches to learning, teaching prescribed skill acquisition, and retraining. The term implies a more explicit formal institutionalised and intentional approach to learning that is imposed on individuals. In contrast, lifelong learning implies that learning consists of a ubiquity of experiences for an individual across his or her life. Lifelong learning embraces both formal and informal settings, and also involves unintended, incidental and unconscious learning.

Among these differing views of lifelong education or lifelong learning, arts venues and artists working with communities have emerged in both realms or in the spaces 'in between'. For example, the State Government of Victoria in Australia claims that it is:

... committed to education. The potential of children and adults must be nurtured and developed, not just in schools but through a well resourced network of libraries, museums, galleries and arts centres that offer lifelong learning for Victorians. (Arts Victoria 2004: 1)

A similar approach is proposed by Pringle (2002) who uses the term 'sites for learning' to embrace both formal education settings such as schools and also more informal educational or cultural locations such as galleries, museums, and arts and community centres. Along with these broader concepts of sites where learning can occur, artists who work with communities have been identified as playing a crucial role in how people learn. According to Garret (2008), engaging artists to work with others provides communities and individuals 'with greater exposure to the benefits of creative practice'. Yúdice (2003) claims that both government and non-government organisations across the globe have harnessed the arts as a means for achieving political, social, cultural and economic benefits. When addressing issues concerning social cohesion, urban renewal and inclusion to invest in what Bourdieu (1993) describes as cultural, social or economic capital, McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras, and Brooks (2004) maintain that the arts have been seen as a vehicle to provide the solutions. As a result there has also been a desire to demonstrate some public benefit or instrumental value as an outcome from arts projects. However, McCarthy *et al.* (2004) and Mulligan *et al.* (2007) argue that measuring the impact of arts projects in terms of public benefit or instrumental value is too narrow. The intrinsic and private benefits for the individuals involved should also be considered.

At the core of many arts initiated projects, in particular community-based arts projects, the task of providing a public benefit generally rests with an artist. In bringing about those benefits, artists who work in community-based arts practice adopt various roles. These include facilitator, mentor, activist, collaborator and enquirer (Lacy 1995, Pringle 2002, Sullivan 2005). The artists also employ collaborative and dialogical approaches (Lacy 1995, Mancillas 1998, Kester 2004, Galton 2008) to engage others in learning. Artists working with communities assist in an overarching aim that lifelong education or learning is crucial to ensure societies

and individuals are able to adapt, innovate, create and respond to the rapid and continually changing circumstances of being situated in an uncertain and globalised world (Longworth and Davies 1996; European Commission 2007).

The outcomes that emerge from community-based arts projects—in either formal or informal learning situations—indicate that those projects provide rich learning experiences. In addition, the recent interest in the ways that artists engage participants (Pringle 2002, Galton 2008) highlights the crucial role that artists play in these projects. Rather than continue to examine the impact on others or the ways in which artists work, however, in this article I draw on some findings from my doctoral research (Selkrig 2009) to explore the types of learning that have occurred for artists who have acted as facilitators and mentors and in a range of other roles on community-based arts projects, and how they folded those experiences into their identities.

Frameworks to consider artists' learning, experience and identity

My inquiry into the learning that occurs for artists when they involve themselves in community-based arts projects was premised on learning being a social and relational process. I adapted Wenger's (1998) social theory of learning to create a framework within which I could demonstrate how learning for individuals is caught in 'the middle' between a range of intersecting components and theoretical considerations such as identity, meaning, practice and community. My framework was also underpinned by Jarvis' (2006) view that, while it is impossible to provide a comprehensive theory of learning, for learning to occur four elements—similar to those provided by Wenger—must always be present. The four elements are the person, the social situation, the experience that occurs in the situation, and the process involved for the person in transforming and storing the learning that occurred. According to Jarvis (2006: 198) 'each of these four elements has innumerable, interacting variables'.

Rather than viewing my framework as a meta-theory, as Wenger does with his theory, my intention was to use my conceptual framework as a tool to highlight the range of complex variables that need to be considered as potentially having an impact on individuals (in this instance artists) and their learning. As Jarvis (2006: 52) suggests, 'we cannot divorce our philosophical or psychological thinking about learning from the sociological'. Due to the complexity of human learning, any theories that explore the concept of learning must be interdisciplinary.

Developing a conceptual framework that allowed for multiple factors to be considered when analysing and interpreting the artists' experiences, also involved incorporating some major linking devices within the framework. The devices relate to the interplay between the internal, subjective, or what Côté and Levine (2002) describe as *agentic* world, and the external, objective structural world. These worlds continually interact to mediate our learning and identities. Bourdieu's (1993) concepts of habitus, capital and fields, along with Giddens' (1991) perspective that constant interaction of human agency and social structures influence each other provided additional elements within the framework from which I worked. Côté and Levine's (2002) notion of identity capital, which blends concepts of cultural capital and social capital described by Bourdieu (1986), Putnam's (2000) notions of social capital, and what Becker (1993)

describes as human capital, were also considered. Identity capital involves individuals acquiring or possessing both tangible resources that are visible. These include educational qualifications and membership of groups, as well as intangible resources that include self-esteem and critical thinking abilities that may be hidden from the outside world. These resources, according to Côté and Levine (2002), assist individuals in negotiating their life passages.

Mishler's (1999) model of identity formation, which takes into account the variables of disjunctions, discontinuities, transitions and turning points that occur through 'chance events and encounters' that shape our learning and identities, offered another device to inform my inquiry. I was also mindful of Jarvis' (2006) perspective that learning can occur when a disjuncture happens in our experiences, where our biographies and our interpretation of an episode are not harmonious, thus forcing us to ask questions. Mezirow's (1991: 12) concept of transformative learning, 'the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action', was also considered for the study.

Furthermore, my framework provided an opportunity to explore Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) notions of plateaus, rhizomatics, and becoming, as well as Deleuze's (1988) concept of folds, to view the artists' experiences. These various theoretical perspectives offered a series of lenses through which I could consider how conscious, unconscious, intended, unintended and incidental learning experiences in formal, informal or non-formal situations can become part of our biographies.

Methodological approaches adopted for the inquiry

The aim of my inquiry was to talk with artists who involve themselves in community-based arts practices. Listening to the artists' stories and recording our conversations provided a mechanism by which I could consider the impact and meanings that their experiences had for them. In seeking participants for the study, I initially approached arts and cultural workers who lived in specific regional locations in south east Australia and were employed by local government or other organisations involved in community cultural development. These workers acted as conduits to the participants. They were asked to identify, and initially approach, two or three artists in their respective communities who complied with the criteria I had established for selecting participants. The criteria stated that I wanted to talk with visual artists who worked on community-based arts projects. The artists were not required to have completed formal arts practice training or education. My preference was that the artists would not have undertaken formal training or education, such as a teacher education program, that related to understanding teaching and learning approaches. A few of the arts and cultural workers indicated that due to the small number of artists in their area, some of the prospective participants may have had a teaching background. I was able to clarify that finding artists who had not experienced teacher education training was my ideal and, if that was not possible it should not be a reason to exclude artists from being nominated. As seen in Figure 1, 12 visual artists from a range of regional locations across south eastern Australia volunteered to take part in my study.

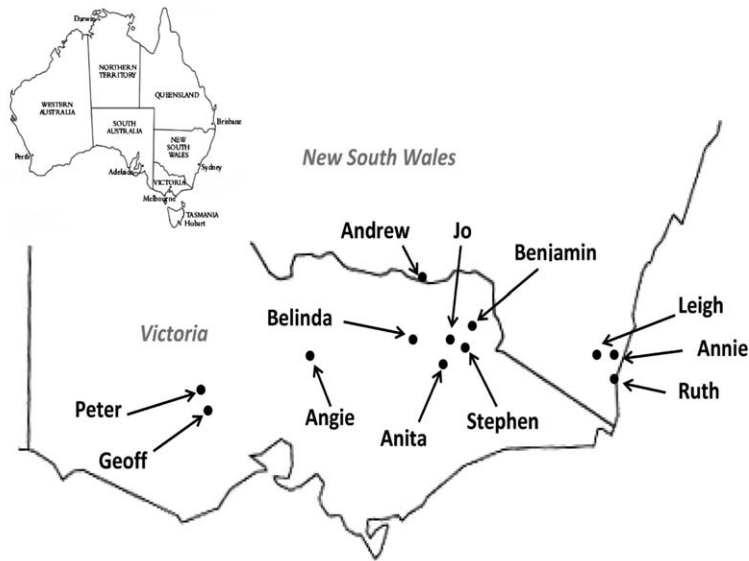


Figure 1. Artists who participated and the geographic area covered
 Note: the artists' actual names are used as per the ethics agreements they signed.

Once the artists agreed to participate, I travelled to interview them in their own communities. The material presented here is based on field notes and the transcripts of conversations with the artists. The focus of this article draws on particular threads from my findings and relates to the artists' reflections about how working as a community-based artist and working with others in social contexts has impacted on them. I explore what they learnt from those experiences and how those experiences contributed to both the tangible and intangible resources that fold into their identity capital.

Artists: we disrupted our own identity

Many of the participants in this study had been practising studio artists prior to including community-based arts practice as part of their work repertoire. Having an ambition to be practising studio artists who exhibit in galleries can require artists to conform to what Bourdieu (1996) refers to as the 'rules' within the field of art, particularly if they want to be 'consecrated' as artists by those who have power within the field. One participant, Belinda, described the tough realities of attempting to become an artist according to the rules of the field, as well as the need for her to sustain herself. Having additional skills such as turning her hand to community-based arts practice was necessary for her to survive:

I was always exhibiting, always entering prizes, always having shows. So that was my focus: always to be a practising artist... but obviously, you need to be able to feed yourself, so I was also teaching and doing other art projects as well to back it up.

According to the artists I spoke with, even when they did achieve a level of recognition within the art field, their individual circumstances did not necessarily become any easier. Becoming a successful artist and acquiring the necessary agency and cultural capital within the arts field, Geoff still found that earning a living from his art remained tenuous and uncertain. The need to have a more guaranteed income became a major factor for him deciding to undertake his first community arts project.

You'd sell a couple of works, but you had to remain on the dole [unemployment benefits], which I call the art grant anyway. So the art grant was really keeping us but there was more and more and more restrictions with that... the initial reason I did the Stawell [arts project] was because I needed money.

In making the choice to move outside the conventional art field model of being an artist—by exhibiting in galleries—and opting to work with communities, some tensions and disjunctions arose for these artists. They were confronted with, and were forced to challenge their own perspectives about, what being a 'real' artist entailed. As Geoff stated: 'I had the idea I should be able to make a living out of my art, not doing community art... I had to work out ways of dealing with people and ways of dealing with workshops'.

Ruth also had some issues with being seen or labelled as a community artist, declaring that she does: 'work within communities of specific people you could say... but in terms of community arts I don't do that thing of "We're going to do a community project"'. Instead, Ruth described herself as a 'photographic artist ... [and] the way that I go about my work is that I'm a quasi sociologist but I just do it with a camera'.

Along with their work on community-based arts projects, several of the artists chose to continue exhibiting their studio work. Anita was exhibiting in a local gallery, rather than attempting to re-enter the art scene in Melbourne and what she saw that as entailing: 'I don't like having to sell yourself ... [and] probably, I don't have that ego to be in the arts scene'. Geoff who, like Anita, had been a successful exhibiting gallery artist in Melbourne, had also chosen not to re-enter the commercial art gallery world. Instead, he participated in group exhibitions and had an annual exhibition of his work from his studio at home: 'I'll have maybe one a year and it's always a big party and I make not much money but my work's out there being seen'. Annie continued to have solo exhibitions in commercial galleries in Canberra and Sydney although, because she was a regional artist and working on a range of projects, she was somewhat removed from the art scene and the expectations that would be placed on her. Annie claimed that she was now able to follow her own passions as a result of her current situation: 'You know, you're true to yourself, you know, believe in what you do and you're not swaying this way and that influenced by other things that you think you should be doing'.

The tangible and intangible resources that the artists had acquired from being involved in community-based arts projects, and had subsequently folded into their identity capital, had made an impact. They had reframed their perceptions of what being an artist meant to them. The ways in which these artists chose to engage with the art field had also shifted. It was now more on their terms.

Artists: we challenge others' views of who we are

Along with questioning their own perceptions about what it meant to be an artist, by working on community-based arts projects the artists also became aware of the need to challenge social constructed concepts of the artist. By working on community-based arts projects, they were situated in social environments that Côté and Levine (2002) believe is where our personal identities are negotiated and mediated, where individuals find a fit between their socially constructed identity and their uniqueness. The artists indicated that a schism existed between their dispositions and how they saw themselves, and that was not in accord with the normative representations of an artist's identity that could exist in a community. The artists, while aware of their being employed for specific community-based arts projects and charged with making some form of art, found that having the label of artist ascribed to them could be problematic. They spoke about being confronted with a range of perceptions about what an artist was according to those with whom they worked. They were seen by others as being special, unique or different. This clash of perceptions generated positive antagonism between them and their communities. As a result, the artists described how they would become the centre of attention in a project or community as a type of celebrity, or alternately treated with suspicion. The participants in my study did not necessarily want, or to be seen as wanting, the focus put on them. Benjamin stated that the process was one of mutual sharing:

People tend to, you know, focus on the artist or the maker because there sort of has to be one figurehead, which I find odd. . . It's just not the way I operate, you know. So this is a way of me sharing with other people and communicating I guess.

Dealing with others' preconceived notions of artists and how they should perform their role emerged as an underlying agenda for several of the participating artists. Situating themselves in their own community, broader community settings, or institutionalised environments such as schools, provided opportunities for artists to challenge and de-mystify people's perceptions about who they were. Belinda was determined to debunk stereotypic myths about artists as she felt that 'the notion of the artist is not always highly regarded; there can be that view of the druggie or hippie or whatever. But I don't think I fit that stereotype'. A similar view was expressed by Anita when she spoke about her reasons for becoming involved in community-based arts practice:

I can help break down preconceived ideas about who and what an artist is, which is a positive thing about working in the community and being involved in community events. The community can see that all artists aren't temperamental, eccentric people, that they are creative thinkers and problem solvers and have an important role in the scheme of things. . . I like to be breaking down barriers and preconceived ideas about who and what an artist is and to reinforce the concept that we are all creative in different ways.

Although wanting to connect with their communities, the artists were also aware that possessing the identity of an artist provided them with a licence of

sorts to challenge or work as an activist to 'dislodge restrictive paradigms of thought' (Sullivan 2005: 153) within a community, thereby allowing them to disrupt the community's perceptions of what an artist is.

In their endeavour to change perceptions, while acting as what Lacy (1995) refers to as activists, the artists' practices were respectful and in most cases sensitive. Shifting others' perceptions allowed the artists to be seen in a different light. The culmination of the projects resulted in the artists feeling accepted or welcomed within their communities. By challenging the social identity of an artist, a mechanism was provided for them to belong and to feel valued and recognised for the work they had done. They described how connecting with others assisted in their personal growth: developing relationships with others provided the opportunity for having a group or personal identity with which they could feel comfortable or had greater congruence with how they saw themselves.

Artists: the diverse and unpredictable sites provided a stimulus

When involved in community-based art practice, the artists worked in a range of sites or social spaces where their individual worlds converged with the broader structural/cultural worlds. Entering into these sites and spaces, the artists described how they were confronted with new situations that required them to solve problems and adapt to circumstances. Working under such circumstances was part of the reason why they undertook this work, and for them it was crucial that each project be both different from other projects and remain somewhat fluid.

Along with the unpredictable and fluid nature of community-based arts practice that stimulated the artists, their work involved mixing with a variety of people in the diverse settings. Many of the settings included marginalised, socially excluded or economically disadvantaged members of society. The artists specifically referred to working with: indigenous communities; street kids; rural youth; rural communities dealing with economic hardship, drought or recovery after bushfires; school children in underprivileged areas; and recent arrivals to Australia.

Entering into these unfamiliar contexts provided a mechanism that allowed the artists to understand some crucial elements about why they undertook this type of work. These elements related to the ongoing interaction with others and to a relational (Bourriaud 2002) and dialogical (Bakhtin 1990, Kester 2004) process of arts practice and learning that occurred. The importance that the artists placed on interaction with others was a major reason why they continued with community-based arts practice. They were learning about themselves through others. Annie, when talking about her work with indigenous communities in the north of Australia, stated that she:

... realised over time it was a long process of learning from each other because it was such a cultural gap. At first I thought I learnt everything and then over time I realised that I didn't learn much at all. But there was just, you know, just lots of little things that we shared that had a profound impact... [it] sort of took my life and turned me upside down and sent me on my way.

Angie came to realise that interaction with others was the 'bedrock' for retaining her involvement. According to her 'you start to understand yourself better because you actually understand yourself through other people and so, as humans, we can't be isolated'. Similarly Ruth stated that: 'Working with people you learn about them, they learn about you... As a new person I was reflecting the community back to them, but they were also reflecting me back to be me'.

The notion of connecting and belonging surfaced to varying degrees and with different levels of meaning for artists, depending on how connected they were with their community. When artists worked on projects within the communities in which they lived, they tended to act as citizen artists, as described by Mancillas (1998), allowing their neighbours to see beyond the stereotype of an artist as being an intruder or different. Becoming citizen artists provided a balance, or an alternative source of identity, to their individual ways of art-making. Their work, however, could be misinterpreted by the same communities, and resulted at times in a sense of isolation for the artists.

A rewarding aspect for Belinda in the work she did was 'having these people you may never have had anything to do with in the past and sort of form a bit of a bond and relationship with them and having something a little bit out of the ordinary'. Anita and Geoff provided similar responses about the deep connections with people that came from being involved in community-based arts practice:

The reason why I keep doing it is that I get to work with people that I normally wouldn't get to work with or meet. I've made some really good friendships and there has been that sense of achieving something, doing something together. (Anita)

It's just part of our life, and you learn in every project and you make friends in every project, and they're very important and my life has been much richer for it and it's something you can keep on doing, you know. (Geoff)

Being situated in a range of unfamiliar contexts, and the disjunctures it provided to the artists, acted as a series of plateaus (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) where their energies were heightened for long enough to leave an afterimage of its influence on them that they could then incorporate into other situations. The afterimages of their experiences had been folded into their identity capital.

Artists: we've developed deeper understandings

The majority of arts projects undertaken by the artists had been designed to achieve instrumental outcomes prescribed by funding bodies or government policies. The intended outcomes of these initiatives included improving the social and or economic capital of communities through boosting notions of connectedness, belonging and wellbeing both in those communities and for the participants in the particular project. The artists initially described how they had not necessarily seen the intended outcomes for the participants applying to

themselves. Woven into the reasons why they had entered into community based-arts practice(s), as alluded to by Belinda and Geoff earlier, were pragmatic considerations such as financial imperatives. The artists initially saw the community work in terms of an income. Angie was clear in stating that her need to follow a different trajectory was a rhizomatic event based on the necessity to earn an income:

I had to find another way to actually be an artist and to do what I want to do and to work with the materials that I want to work with... It wasn't something I looked to do... I knew nothing about community art, but off I went. I didn't go into this thinking I'm going to create change and I'm going to work magic and all these people are going to be re-born. I went into it because it was a job. Someone was going to pay me to do some art.

The need to find some form of paid employment was also raised by Peter when he described his initial experience of a community arts project (on which he had worked with Geoff):

We both determined that art was something we did want to spend our lives doing. But we both had families and so of course money becomes one of those things... there are some practicalities that need to be addressed... the first couple of years, it was desperation—it was economically driven and we did take whatever was offered.

As a result of becoming further immersed in a range of community-based arts projects, over a period of time the artists described a transformation where the income they derived, although important, became secondary to a raised awareness of the values and principles that underpinned their dispositions. When the artists talked about their values they were grounded in concepts of social justice, equity and empowerment of themselves and others. Working as a community-based artist in communities provided a disjuncture that encouraged them to question their own philosophical beliefs. This questioning shifted them from purely an income focus to include an ideologically-driven perspective for the work they did. After being involved in community-based arts practice for some time, Angie was now able to realize that:

I saw how it can create significant change. I mean it's not earth shattering but for those kids and that school it made this enormous difference. So I learnt that participatory art can be a really powerful thing when you take people and guide them and provide skills, umm, and help, that they can transform not only the environment, but themselves.

All of the artists had been involved in community-based arts practice for some time, although several of them indicated that they had not fully explored why they did the work they do. It also appears that they had not been provided with an opportunity to reflect, make sense of or consider the learning that had occurred for them by becoming involved in community-based arts practice.

During my discussions with the artists, there were occasions when they spoke about aspects of their lives that they had seemed not to have consciously thought about previously. At times they also found it difficult to articulate their circumstances. While describing their work as an adventure, full of challenges, always interesting and posing new problems, they also spoke about how, in trying to make sense of what they did, they could 'get lost in it', or that it was a 'meandering path' and they were not really sure what they did, as it 'just sort of formed itself'.

The ways in which the artists initially described their experiences appeared to be a series of plateaus, as identified by Deleuze and Guattari (1987). The artists could describe situations that had left an impression or afterimage and that they had reactivated in other activities that they became involved in. Although many of the experiences had not consciously been thought about, the artists had folded them into their identity capital, resulting in a gradual and ongoing transformation of their identities over time. In providing an opportunity for them to reflect on their experiences, they were able to speak candidly about how their experiences had influenced them. By reframing their thinking to regard the work they did as an interactive and relational process (Bourriaud 2002) that involved dialogical practices (Bakhtin 1990, Kester 2004) and reflexivity (Giddens 1996) they were able to move from what Giddens (1979) describes as either tacit or practical consciousness to discursive consciousness, or a heightened awareness of both the tangible and intangible resources that comprise their identity capital (Côté and Levine 2002). This was an unintended outcome of the study, as I had made an assumption that the artists would have, at some point, considered these questions themselves. For those who had previously considered aspects of their work, the discussions I had with them also provided an opportunity for them to confirm or reconceptualise their thoughts. Through the process of our conversations, what emerged were rich and varied tapestries of these artists' journeys, exposing some of the meanings of their experiences for them as well as for me.

Concluding thoughts

My research provided insights about the cumulative effect on artists when they are involved in community-based arts projects. In pursuing my discussions with these artists a clear picture emerged that they had also transformed themselves. Through their interaction with a broader range of people within their communities they had developed a sense of belonging, an acknowledgement of who they were and a deeper understanding about themselves at a number of levels. They were also able to describe how over time they had come to realise that working with others acted as a reflexive process.

The stories told by the artists, and their interpretations, provide further material about the currently emerging literature and research that questions the dominant way of measuring value that based on instrumental benefits (McCarthy *et al.* 2004, Mulligan *et al.* 2007). This research enhances our understanding of the impact at a personal level of the intrinsic benefits that can be derived from community-based arts practice. The material I have presented in this article also offers some insights for the diverse funding bodies or authorities that employ

artists to undertake arts-based projects. Rather than focussing on artists' approaches to pedagogy or the roles that they perform, an examination of the changes to, effects on and learning that occurs for artists who are involved in establishing these environments may reveal broader understandings. An examination by organisations and government bodies of the complexities involved might reveal a wider range of benefits that can be derived from such projects.

Learning had occurred for the artists as a result of being involved in community-based arts practice. What they learned had not only folded into their identities but also assisted them to further develop agentic qualities on which they could navigate their respective life journeys. Examining only a certain element of their lives, the part that involved community-based arts practice and the transformations it had provided for them, offers some insights into these artists' biographies. It also highlights Jarvis' (2006) assertion that how learning and meaning-making occurs for each individual cannot be entirely accounted for because of the innumerable and interacting variables that occur when each individual learns in a range of lifelong and life wide contexts.

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